

CLAUDE DEBUSSY:
HARMONIC INNOVATIONS IN HISTORICAL AND MUSICAL CONTEXT

Ford Joseph Forquarean

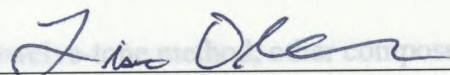
Introduction

Claude Debussy's music developed as a product of his environment and culminated in the creation of a unique harmonic vernacular that permeates the twentieth century's tonal language. Through Claude Debussy: Harmonic Innovations in Historical and Musical Context his formative years as a composer will be examined as a natural progression of his environment. The first section of this work will discuss these developments while the second part will analyze the structure and form of the *Première Rhapsodie for clarinet and piano* to illustrate the culmination of this trajectory.

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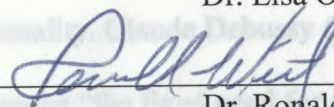
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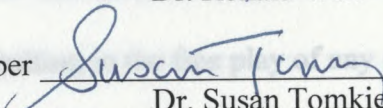
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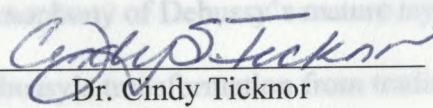
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Introduction

Claude Debussy's music developed as a product of his environment and culminated in the creation of a unique harmonic vernacular that permeates the twentieth century's tonal language. Through a historical and musical context, his early life through his formative years as a composer will be examined as a natural progression of his environment. The first section of this work will discuss these developments while the second part will analyze the structure and form of the *Première Rhapsodie for clarinet and piano* to illustrate the culmination of this trajectory.

Claude Debussy's Influences and Harmonic Innovation

Late Romanticism pushed tonality to its breaking point. Composers were forced to either extend Wagnerian chromatic harmonies to their limits or make a conscious determination to strike against this path. While composers like Arnold Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School expanded chromaticism to a completely atonal application in the creation of the twelve-tone method, other composers forged toward alternatives by creatively reshaping tonality. Claude Debussy (1862-1918) developed a new treatment of tonality that would remove "the fixed need for chordal or intervallic resolution, this open-ended chordal concept resulting in the free play of any chromatic interval above a root, that makes up the chromatic homophony of Debussy's mature style" (Nadeau 71).

Multiple influences allowed Debussy's transformation from traditional tonal progression to his new expanded harmony including the infamous Richard Wagner, Russian musical influence, the French symbolists, and the orientalism that was in vogue throughout Paris. Debussy's unique ideas stemmed as much from his environment as they developed from

his own genius. Claude Debussy molded these influences to expand and morph the function of German Romantic harmony and develop his unique style.

Debussy illustrated signs of innovation from an early age. Born on August 22nd, 1862 to Manuel and Victorine Debussy, he suffered from an unstable family life with his father sparsely present in his early years and the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War (Lesure 1). In his tumultuous home environment, the young eight year old Debussy was recounted by his sister Adele to “spend ‘entire days seated in a chair dreaming” (Roberts 12) with his imagination as “a haven against the ravages outside” (12). In the war’s late days, Victorine and the children sought refuge with her sister-in-law, Aunt Clémentine, in the resort town of Cannes. Aunt Clémentine would have a profound influence on young Debussy by arranging early piano training with a relatively unimportant Italian musician, Jean Cerutti (Lesure 1). Though he began study while in Cannes, his biggest early influence resulted from his father’s imprisonment in the war. While sentenced to four years after his capture in the Siege of Paris in 1871, Manuel was able to befriend a fellow soldier Charles de Sivry. After his sentence was commuted a year later, he arranged lessons with Sivry’s mother, Madame Maute de Fleurville (Roberts 30). While not actually a pupil of Chopin as she claimed and not a member of the aristocracy, she taught Debussy for free and with almost a year’s training, Debussy gained acceptance into the Paris Conservatoire (31). From this point, Debussy’s quality of education is unquestioned but the Conservatoire environment’s strict methodology would spur his artistic growth while feeding Debussy’s disdain toward the conservative approach to harmony.

As young Debussy entered the Conservatoire, his studies imbibed him with a deep knowledge and understanding of music while allowing him to explore new solutions to

harmony. Debussy began his studies in the class of pianist Antoine Marmontel and enrolled soon in the rudiments class of Albert Lavignac. While Marmontel maintained faith in Debussy's potential, the young pianist would never come to fruition as a soloist and would gain the most invaluable instruction from Lavignac who introduced him to the works of Richard Wagner and harmonic systems employed outside of Europe (Roberts 35). While most teachers admired his intelligence like the younger Lavignac, more traditional professors like Emile Durand were skeptical of his carelessness and mischief and did not appreciate his creative solutions to harmony. As fellow classmate Paul Vidal would note, Debussy "did not see eye to eye with his teacher [Emile Durand] in the sense that, instead of coming up with the harmonic realizations which the latter was expecting, he always went a step further, inventing solutions that were ingenious, elegant, and delightful but totally unacademic" (Nichols 6). Debussy in his own words would recognize that:

"[The Conservatoire] wasn't the best time in my life, but it was no more disagreeable for me than anyone else... The teaching of harmony seems to me quite misguided. I can assure you I did nothing very remarkable in the harmony class. It was the custom of my time for the professors to teach their students by a useless little game that consisted of trying to discover the secrets of a particular composer's harmony. I humbly must confess that I could never discover them and it wasn't hard to console myself." (Roberts 37).

This jibe at the conservatoire illustrates Debussy's attitude toward Durand and the strict atmosphere that repressed his creations. The practice of teaching traditional harmony was too narrow to encompass the burgeoning composer's creative desires. In these years

between 1871 and 1884 when he would win the Prix de Rome, the musician would begin his compositional output and would travel beyond the narrow Parisian streets. The surprising catalyst of these new inspirations and influences would come from two remarkable associations with Russian aristocrat Madame Nadezhda von Meck and the more intimate relation to Madame Marie-Blanche Vasnier.

Marmontel was able to acquire work for Debussy during the summers of his conservatoire career first employed to Madame Marguerite Wilson-Pelouze, the President of the French Republic's mistress, and later employment as the piano instructor to the Russian, Madame von Meck's, children in the summers between 1880 and 1883 (Roberts 45). Through his travels to Russia and experience with Tchaikovsky's main benefactor, he was exposed to Russian music constantly while playing Tchaikovsky with von Meck. Her son Nicholas recalls how his mother introduced him to all of the 'Kutchka,' a band of Russian composers, which "produced an unfavorable impression on Debussy," though as he was exposed "he became better acquainted with Russian music [and] he appreciated it" (Nichols 17). While the young composer had experienced modality with Lavignac, he surely absorbed the modality of the Russian five and, while disliking their crafting of tonality and treatment of harmonic progression, employed these compositional tools later. In the early 1890s, he would again study Mussorgsky, pouring over his opera *Boris Godunov* and actually quoting the work in his *Nuages* from *Nocturnes* written between 1897 and 1899 (Roberts 92, 225). As the teenage Debussy quickly transitioned from adolescence into adulthood, he would become embroiled in a fierce scandal that could have destroyed his career in the years leading to the Prix de Rome.

At age eighteen, Debussy made the acquaintance of a thirty-two year old amateur soprano, Madame Marie-Blanche Vasnier. The wife of a wise, well-read Parisian civil servant, Madame Vasnier had been married for fifteen years at the time Debussy became accompanist for her amateur voice class in 1881 and, as the young composer became involved in an affair with Madame Vasnier, Monsieur Vasnier unknowingly welcomed and supported the young artist that soon became a regular visitor to their home (Roberts 48-51). The affair itself is extremely important in Debussy's early compositional output and innovation. Passionately dedicated to Madame Vasnier in both a sexual and emotional context, vocal works written almost exclusively to her dominate the periods between 1881 and the Prix de Rome in 1884. Most of these compositions are unimportant in Debussy's creative or innovative output, but a setting of poet Verlaine by Debussy titled *Fêtes galantes pour Marie Vasnier* and a setting of Stéphane Mallarmé's *Apparition* show early signs of the burgeoning symbolist (Roberts 50). While the young Debussy was spurred to enter the coveted Prix de Rome by the Vasniers, his affair deeply concerned those around him. Vidal writes to the extent of Debussy's obsession, "everything he writes is for her and owes its existence to her... I am sorry to have got mixed up in it all, and not to have let things take their course. His moral sense is undeveloped, he's nothing but a sensualist" (Roberts 56-58). After his winning bid for the Prix de Rome in 1884, he almost resigned the award for fear of leaving Paris and his beloved Marie. The young sensualist began to develop toward his innovative new style that would start to blossom after the emotional isolation of his travel to Rome and into the late days of his Roman "spring."

Debussy's travel to Rome in 1885 was marked by extreme homesickness, distaste for Rome itself, and a period of experimentation that allowed his sensualist nature to manifest in his composition. While in Rome, Debussy was required to write "the statutory *envois*, the symphonic and vocal odes laureates had to produce annually for the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris" (Roberts 65). In his experimentation on a later lost work *Zuleima*, he claimed; "those great stupid lines bore me to death... My music would be in danger of sinking under the weight" and went on to write "it is not at all the sort of music I want to write. I'm after music that is supple and concentrated enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul and to the whims of reverie" (65). Debussy begins to form and codify his own tastes and beliefs. This formation of ideology would evolve into his more delicate, mature style in later years, transforming from youthful spirit to a new creative desire. In his final *envoi* from Rome, criticism from the Académie addresses a major shift in the rhetoric toward the young artist's work and harmonic construction noting:

"Monsieur Debussy...has a pronounced tendency- too pronounced- toward the exploration of the strange. One has the feeling of musical colour exaggerated to the point where it causes the composer to forget the importance of precise construction and form. It is strongly to be hoped that he will guard against this vague impressionism, which is one of the most dangerous enemies of truth in works of art" (Roberts 66).

In his last Prix de Rome work *Printemps*, Debussy's work begins its association with impressionism in critical review. While his music to this point has been constructed from impressionist texts and he has absorbed the prevailing culture of his native Paris, this

point seems to signify a compositional and rhetorical shift that will lead to his greatest compositions. The Académie also illustrates Debussy's chief development of bringing color and texture to the forefront of compositional construction. As the composer stands on this precipice, his growth during the late 1880s into the 1890s culminated from his exposure to orientalism, his ever-changing view on Wagner, and the profound influence of his bohemian lifestyle including his lifelong friendship with Erik Satie.

French Orientalism affected the output of the great symbolists of the mid to late 1800s. Debussy's compositions were not immune to Asian influence, like most avenues of literature and visual art during this period. While exotic themes manifested in art forms throughout the renaissance and classical periods, the Parisian fervor for Asian goods was in full swing by the second half of the nineteenth century. By 1864, Carl Engel's book *The Music of the Most Ancient Nations* contains the first reported use of pentatonic as a "term in English and apparently predated the emergence of analogous terms in other European languages" (Day-O' Connell 225). Debussy was exposed to these exotic glimpses from an early age through the Parisian market stalls selling small trinkets from the 'orient.' French fascination with Asia is best illustrated through the exotic flair of the 1889 Paris Exhibition. While this example stems from later in Debussy's compositional formation, the young composer had experience earlier with Lavignac and shows an obsession with collecting small trinkets; Gabriel Pierné recalling how while in Rome in 1885 Debussy "spent his time with antiques dealers and made a clean sweep of tiny Japanese objects which entranced him" (Nichols 5). This expression later took hold of the post-Prix de Rome Debussy after his exposure to "'exotic' sounds of the Javanese gamelan and Vietnamese theatre" during the 1889 Paris Exhibition that would "arouse

wistful reminiscences in Debussy's writing, and one piece- *Pagodes*, from the piano collection *Estampes*- would bear the gamelan's unmistakable influence even at the remove of over a decade" (Day O'Connell 226). Other less apparent applications appear in rhythmic treatment and polyrhythms of his masterpieces throughout the 1890s. The permeating presence of the Javanese gamelan and oriental aesthetic of the exhibition would remain a constant influence hidden beneath his distinctly French palate. Debussy's French nationality would play a significant role in his conflicting relationship of love and hatred that he shared with the music of Richard Wagner. Wagner's deep impact on Debussy began in childhood, crafted by strong nationalist undertones. The relationship between the French and Germans in Debussy's early childhood was marred by the Franco-Prussian war and fierce reparations invoked by the Germans. The brutality felt in the coming years resulted in the brutal massacres of the siege of Paris where Manuel would be captured and imprisoned. While France was in no place to refuse surrender, "a desire for revenge -*revanche*- was a strong undercurrent in French politics as well as in the collective consciousness of the people" (Robert 27). Along with the already strong sense of French nationalism that echoed defeat, Parisians took a strict anti-german ideology that would shape education and pedagogy in the Conservatoire for many years. Influenced by his father, rebellion against Conservatoire life, and French nationalism, the young composer would secretly examine Wagner's scores and quietly share respect for Wagner's craft while searching for a different treatment of harmony. Richard Wagner's name carried great weight and gravity in the Debussy household. As a boy, young Debussy obtained a score of the *Tannhäuser* overture and

secretly poured over it away from his father's ear; his father claiming "Wagner wouldn't be anything if he had been born in France. There's nothing in his music but a lot of noise... I couldn't hear one passage that came from the heart" (Dumesnil 19). Aside from his father's bitterness caused by the war, the staunch Frenchman most likely would have disapproved of the dissonant, heavy chromatic style at a time when the popular style of Jules Massenet graced Parisian halls. As young Debussy studied at the Conservatoire, he explored the taboo Wagner "eagerly discuss[ing] it with his friends and teachers" (Roberts 44) and with Albert Lavignac, a younger more radical professor who would later publish two books on Wagner. Lavignac's true impact would later be felt in the Prix de Rome attempts of 1883 and 1884. Debussy's first attempt received harsh criticism for what "might have been the presence of leitmotifs and the blurring of section breaks in Debussy's Prix de Rome cantata for 1883, *Le Gladiateur*" (44). Curbing his own style in the 1884 bid, his "politically correct tribute to Massenet and Gounod" (55) would allow him to win. While Wagner's influence in conservatory life germinated, the strict French school would not accept such unconventional influence. Much later, Wagner's influence would haunt Debussy's only opera.

As Debussy tackled his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* and his monumental *Pelléas and Mélisande*, he searched to separate himself from Wagner's powerful influence. Deeply involved with the bohemian lifestyle by the early 1890s, Debussy would live in relative poverty while sharing the drawing rooms of Parisian intellectuals. During this period, Debussy "was single-mindedly educating himself. He absorbed not only *Tristan and Parsifal*, but the novels of Balzac, Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, and Flaubert; not only the gamelan music of Indonesia (heard at the Exposition Universelle of

1889), but Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*," while also squandering his meager earnings on "oriental objets d'art, Pre-Raphaelite prints, [and] Art Nouveau knick-knacks" (Roberts 93) to satisfy his intellectual curiosity. While partaking in this day-to-day existence, he developed a deep friendship with Erik Satie that would last a lifetime. His *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* of 1892-1894 illustrates several characteristics of Satie's influence, Satie stating:

"I explained to Debussy how we Frenchmen needed to break away from the Wagnerian adventure, which did not correspond with our natural aspirations. And I told him that I was not at all anti-Wagner, but that we needed our own music- without sauerkraut if possible. Why not make use of the representational methods of Claude Monet, Cézanne, Toulouse-Lautrec and so on? Why not make a musical transposition of them? Nothing simpler. Are they not alternative means of expression too?" (Roberts 98).

Debussy seems to take heed of this advice in the *faun*'s composition. The pervasive imagery, unique colors, and pent-up desire expressed by Mallarmé's original text are conveyed through the flowing, hazy flute solo in the opening, spinning through an atmospheric treatment of texture and color to evoke the dream-like musings. Debussy does not try to use Wagnerian leitmotif or treatment to create a program but "aims to create an impression in the reader's mind in the manner of a dream" (Roberts 103) with Debussy further stating, "that 'perhaps it's what remains of the dream within the depths of the faun's flute'" (103). Equally important in the work's construction, Debussy constructs the form loosely while not following the pacing or structure of the poem itself (Berman 230). He also treats chromaticism differently from Wagner's works while still

venturing far from tonal or key structures by removing progression to any given key center. The work is motivically based and constructed modularly, with each section containing a separate atmosphere or idea. Finally the chords and structures could exist “freed from the absolute need to articulate functional tonal argument were able to exist as colored pitch masses” (Nadeau 73). While Satie’s advice functions creative impetus, his next masterwork shows Wagner’s shadow while attempting to avoid his influence.

Pelléas et Mélisande illustrates Symbolism’s deep influence on Debussy’s work. By 1894, the impressionist label infiltrates the common vernacular, but while Debussy becomes defined by this term, the visual art movement itself has already waned (Roberts 132). After witnessing playwright Maurice Maeterlinck’s stage performance of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, he gained permission from Maeterlinck to write an opera from the play. Maeterlinck was known in symbolist circles as a legendary figure (Roberts 106). His play recreates the Tristan legend while setting it in his symbolist light, leaving Debussy with material that would lead to the “challenge of meeting Wagner on his own ground” (Roberts 107). Rising to this task, Debussy had to face the difficulty of Wagner’s sexually explicit tragedy while facing it from his more introverted, delicate manner. While Wagner uses the consummation of Tristan and Isolde’s passion and death’s grip glorified, “the Debussy-Maeterlinck version [of] death is a symbol of nothingness and failure, even though at first it is only the imminence of death that brings passion to life. Neither Pelléas nor Mélisande is transfigured by death: they lose everything and gain nothing” (108). Debussy’s treatment deals with human emotion while letting the characters portray themselves as intimately human. Debussy expresses much earlier that in his sensibility, he “would always rather deal with something where the passage of

events is subordinated to a thorough and extended portrayal of human feelings”(110) where “what they fail to articulate is meant to be understood by other means, through symbols, objects and images either present on stage or alluded to in the dialogue” (111). While Wagner’s powerful, expansive music carries his emotional content to the audience, Debussy wants the audience to experience his allusions and inferences to understand his vision. Debussy’s use of orchestra contrasted Wagner’s writing by creating an opera that was able to “liberate and concentrate the perception of the harmony. No more subtle harmonic language than this ha[d] existed, with such extraordinary care devoted to details of register, interval, modality and harmonic significance” (111). Debussy’s intensely evocative opera culminated in the use of his knowledge and sensibility to craft a revolutionary style of music.

Claude Debussy’s revolutionary compositional innovations changed and expanded the nature of German Romantic harmony and form. While his unique genius is undisputedly pervasive in his compositional output, the master sensualist, poet, symbolist, and musical painter developed as a product of his environment. Despite anti-Wagnerian sentiment in Paris and the prevailing anti-German sentiment, the young Debussy would become a product of Wagnerian chromatic harmony. While Parisian to the core, Debussy used his intimate knowledge of Wagner’s composition to first accept his influence, and then gradually embrace his own compositional treatment. As Debussy embraced Satie’s advice, he was able to turn to a myriad of influences learned through his self-study of the Kutchka, influence of his professors from Conservatoire training, the experimentation of his Prix de Rome, his French affinity for the oriental, and arguably his most important influence, the symbolist poets and artist from which he derived constant

inspiration. Debussy's broad, expansive taste in art, literature, and music culminates in his own personal style. Through his love of the symbolists and his native Paris, he was able to break away from the ghost of old Klingsor and strike a new path for tonality. Many examples of Debussy's work illustrate his treatment of harmony and show the culmination of these environmental influences in his composition. Structure and form of the *Première Rhapsodie for Clarinet and Piano* will be analyzed to see these trends.

Structural and Motivic Analysis of Debussy's *Première Rhapsodie*

Written as a contest piece for the 1910 Paris Conservatory, Claude Debussy's *Première Rhapsodie for Clarinet and Piano* remains one of the most important works in the clarinet repertoire. While composed after the masterworks *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *Nocturnes*, and *La Mer*, the *Première Rhapsodie* shows the same compositional and structural ideas present in his iconic compositions. Dedicated to Prosper Mimart, the conservatory's clarinet professor at the time, Debussy later transcribed the work for full orchestra in 1911. Constructed in the loose form of a Rhapsody, the work illustrates Debussy's unique style through his treatment of motivic and structural relationships. A rhapsody by definition is "a musical composition of irregular form having an improvisatory character" also characterized as "a highly emotional utterance" or "effusively rapturous or extravagant discourse" (Merriam-Webster). Debussy takes multiple elements from his early influence to develop the work. Unlike his influential predecessor Richard Wagner, Debussy creates the work in different sound worlds within each section. The major structural differences stem from Debussy's treatment of harmony. He does not use harmonic progression to drive the composition but creates each section modularly with loose harmonic pedals and higher tertian harmonies

creating the color and atmosphere of each idea. Debussy's *Première Rhapsodie* illustrates his multiple influences culminating in the genesis of his unique development and construction of this rhapsody.

The work's larger form consists of four major sections of material that while separated and distinct, they carry certain relating traits. The introductory material from measures one through eleven is constructed from a loose pedal **f** with the notes **f**-**a-flat**-**b-flat** (g- b-flat-c in clarinet example in B-flat) in the clarinet comprising the main motivic material. Debussy sets up the slow dream-like tempo, labeling it *Rêveusement lent*, dreamily. Inverting this introductory material, Debussy takes the beginning motive and expands the material in measures eleven to twenty-one. The A section carries the same characteristics of tempo but with an added triplet rhythmic motor.

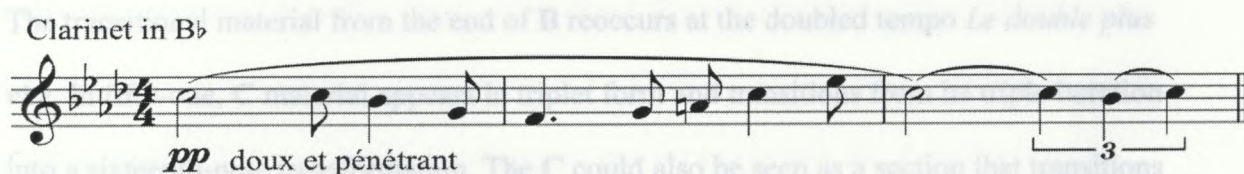


Figure 1- A section melodic material

It settles loosely in **d-flat** with **d-flat** major thirteen chords dominating the texture. From measure twenty-two to twenty-nine, the *Poco mosso* marks the beginning of the B section. Based a half-step up in **d**, the main motion of the clarinet line comprises the most prominent melodic idea.

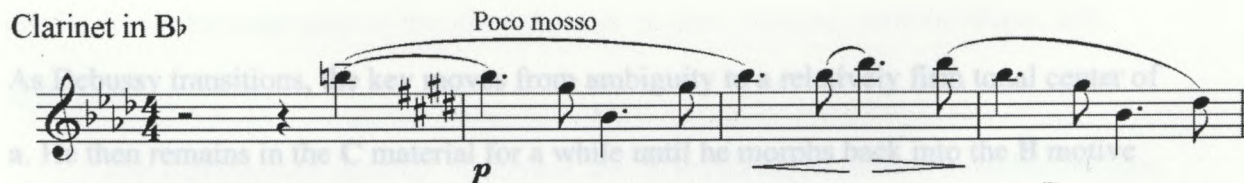


Figure 2- B section melodic material

The **B** clarinet melody contains a radiant, shimmering quality. The larger intervals in both the clarinet and piano combined with the *Poco mosso* build a sense of greater motion. At measure thirty-one, the *Scherzando* **C** material briefly appears in a sparsely textured, impish clarinet part and then quickly spins into the second appearance of **A** material in measure thirty-nine.

Clarinet in B \flat



Figure 3- C section hinted in triplet scherzando figure

The transitional material from the end of **B** reoccurs at the doubled tempo *Le double plus vite*. In fifty-one, **C** material appears in triplet form and transitions from its triple iteration into a sixteenth-note transformation. The **C** could also be seen as a section that transitions and blends the melodic ideas of the **A** and **B** with the upcoming **D** section.

Clarinet in B \flat

Modérément animé (Scherzando)



Figure 4- C appearance in sixteenth note form

As Debussy transitions, the key moves from ambiguity to a relatively firm tonal center of **a**. He then remains in the **C** material for a while until he morphs back into the **B** motive up a major second in the tonal center of **e** that settles in the **B** motive's original center of

d but quickly moves back to the **C** idea in eighty-three. The fourth major idea appears in measure ninety-three as Debussy crafts the **D** section.

Clarinet in B \flat

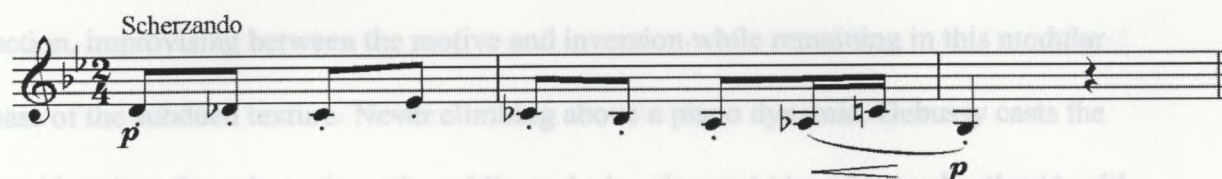


Figure 5- D section material

Mirroring the earlier **C** motive *Scherzando*, the chromatic clarinet motive mixes into the **d, e-flat** sonority in the middle piano range. Measure 124 brings the return of **B** idea in the piano and shifts back to **d** in 128. The **B** idea is stated again with the piano doubling the clarinet an octave lower and then moves to a triplet iteration of the **D** motive that melts into measure 152 with a *cédez*. Throughout this juxtaposition of **B** and **D** sections, Debussy applies a continuous sixteenth-note **f-e-flat/f-f** rhythmic motor until he begins to shift in measure 135 and slowly transforming into triplets before the **A** motive's return.

After the *Animez et augmentez, peu à peu* beginning in 158, the **B** motive begins the spiraling *accelerando* to the end, continuing with *Animé* until the final *Plus animé* that carries the **D** idea to the coda in 197. Debussy takes each of these modular soundscapes and juxtaposes these ideas in rapid succession, using the modules of color to create the rhapsodic structure. Understanding the characteristics of each of these four sections, ties can be drawn between each of the ideas through rhythm, textures, motivic shape, and orchestration.

The introductory material, **A** section, and **B** section each contain a distinctive idea contain linking characteristics. While Debussy links the introduction and **A** through the inversion (**f, a-flat, b-flat** to **b-flat, a-flat, f**), the triplet rhythm in measure two is carried

as the rhythmic motor from nine into **A** and also includes the shape of the leaping octave motion from measure one into the bass of the next section. The contour of the melodic line in the clarinet remains transfixed on the penetrating dream-like atmosphere of the **A** section, improvising between the motive and inversion while remaining in this modular mass of the subdued texture. Never climbing above a piano dynamic, Debussy casts the first ideas in soft-spoken, airy color while enclosing the total idea of **introduction/A** with this aqueous, flowing whisper of sound. He carefully orchestrates the beginning piano line in the treble staff with the clarinet blending into the texture between the octaves.

Figure 6- Introduction with orchestration of the note f in the piano

Figure 6- Introduction with orchestration of the note f in the piano

It only emerges to begin its rhapsodic treatment at **A**. Debussy keeps the melodic contour and rhythm in the **B** section but creates a brighter, more vibrant color by placing the clarinet in the clarion range while creating a larger range in the piano triplets and more separation in the piano between the treble and bass staves. The intervals not directly related to **A** but the downward and upward contour still link the ideas. Later in the piece, Debussy returns to the **A** and **B** through the triplet transition and low bass of 152 as a subdivision of the triplet and retaining the subdivision throughout the reiteration of **B**.

While he does juxtapose **B** with **D** between these first and second **A** and **B**, the two share too many traits in contour, rhythmic texture, and dynamic to be completely separate.

While not as closely connected as the **A** and **B** sections, the interplay of **C**, **D**, and later **D** and **B** show some analogous points in construction. Linked by tempo, both **C** and **D** are marked *Scherzando* at the start of each idea. While **C** starts in triple, the transformation of **C** and most of the subsequent material has a sixteenth note rhythm. The impish texture dances over relatively placid tertian harmonies. When the rhythmic motor of **D** begins, it propels the clarinet motive over the sparse texture. The more percussive quality of **C** and **D** separate their atmospheres from the more liquid colors of **A** and **B**. As Debussy swirls between **B** and **D**, he shares the ideas between voices and octaves, reinforcing the ambiguous rhapsodic nature of the discourse and improvisatory elements. As he employs these elements, he taps into earlier compositional influence.

Debussy's blurring of form and other structural techniques draw from his formative inspirations. His early interest in oriental objects d'art and Asian trinkets and later fascination with the Javanese Gamelan ensemble and Vietnamese theater witnessed by Debussy at the 1889 Paris Exhibition permeate his textural and rhythmic treatment (Day-O'Connell 225-261). Seen in the cross-rhythms and gamelan-esque sounds of the *Première Rhapsodie*, the most obvious example is seen in the sixteenth motor of the **D** section, orchestrating the color in the higher treble voicing. Debussy's blurring of form also takes influence from the Symbolists. Not employing traditional progressions of western tonal harmony, Debussy could pace the structure-based subtle allusion and impression of certain emotion. Erik Satie's suggestion asking, "Why not make use of the representational methods of Claude Monet, Cézanne, Toulouse-Lautrec and so on? Why

not make a musical transposition of them" (Roberts 98) resides near the great creation of his greatest masterworks. The watery textures of the dream-like rhapsody could lie in the shimmering waters and hazy character of the symbolist poetry and artwork that Debussy absorbed from early in life. With the creative impetus to use harmony in his unique construction, he was "freed from the absolute need to articulate functional tonal argument" and modules of sound were "able to exist as colored pitch masses" (Nadeau 69-73). His unique harmonic vision permeates the rhapsodic traits of the work and allows for the unique color of each idea. Debussy was able to construct and craft the work through his craft of color. *Howat, "Debussy, (Achille-) Claude." Oxford Music Online.*

Debussy's *Première Rhapsodie* shows his creative genius in form and structure while still illustrating his previous influences. Through his connection of motives, he constructs, dream-like depictions of color through sound and develops his own soundscapes. The clarinet and piano travel through these sound modules or sound masses and twist in and out of these different ideas in an improvisatory manner. Embodying the rhapsodic form, the work contains the same assembly that appears in his most penetrating, powerful compositions. Debussy's use of structure and treatment of each motive carries outside inspiration combined with his personal inspiration to create an unbelievably intricate and complex work that blurs the lines of musical form and structure.

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